

Saying 'No' In English: Refusal Strategies By Indonesian, Chinese, and Libyan EFL Learners

Lestari Kasih

English Language Teaching Study Program
Postgraduate School, Universitas Islam Malang, 65144 Indonesia
Email: lesta.kasih@gmail.com

Abstract

Refusal is a problematic speech acts for someone who is learning a certain language they have never used as child such as English Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Negative responses to an interlocutor's request are often applied to approve a refusal. In the classroom interaction, learners and lecturers tend to negotiate their requests using various strategies of refusal. Miscommunication appeared when they failed to transfer pragmatic competences. The objectives of this research is to investigate types, the response of refusal strategies, and the reason behind the use of various refusal strategies as performed by Indonesian, Chinese, and Libyan EFL learners. It involved six Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs), three Chinese EFL Learners (CLs), and three Libyan EFL Learners (LLs). They were asked to respond to six varied directions which were achieved refusal strategies. Discourse Completion Task (DCT), observation, and semi-structured interview are used to collect the data for further analysis. Findings portrayed that all three EFL Learners used regret in their refusal strategies. However, the use of refusal strategy in each context given was different. They used indirect refusal strategies as acceptances to the interlocutor. The reason of using politeness in their refusals is to maintain interlocutor's face and minimize Face Threatening Acts (FTA).

Keywords: Refusal Strategy, Indonesian EFL Learners, Chinese EFL Learners, Libyan EFL Learners

INTRODUCTION

In daily interaction, the use of language as a means to perform any actions or utter what we intend to others is not avoided. Having linguistic knowledge and a good understanding of social and cultural factors in various directions is needed to create a good communication. Lack of these factors might lead to the misunderstanding of what other means. The evolution of human interaction has taken shape over thousands of years, and politeness has contributed to the way we communicate today. At this point, politeness is necessary whenever the utterances are released. Some language functions such as stating, requesting, or inviting were found when performing politeness. A response of these language functions usually is refusal.

Refusal strategy is an act performed by any speaker in expressing what they intended to. It is used for negotiation about the rejection of what they feel, which is determined in daily communication, classroom interaction, and public space communication. In some cases speaker might fail to gain the referred response from interlocutor. It happened when the interlocutor does not realize of what our intentions.

For example, when a lecturer asked the student to submit their assignments after the class has already ended and the learner refused to do it by saying, "Oh No Mom, give us an extra time Please". That utterance often happens in a classroom interaction. It is called refusal.

We must realize that it is not easy to refuse due to several reasons and considerations, i.e. someone's status, power, and familiarity. For example, when our lecturers, who are old need help and we are not able to do what they want. However, we make a hard effort not to shame them by refusing their requests. In this situation, we are urged to make an appropriate refusal in order to reject them politely. It is important since we need to save their faces. Of course it will be different when we have to refuse our classmate, we might say everything clearly by telling the truth or give them a plain excuse that explained we cannot fulfill their requests. Disapproval of our intentions can be categorized as refusal and rejection. As stated by Brown (1987), the choice of strategies in refusal is found by social distance, relative, social status, and severity in threatening acts. It means that refusal can be seen and performed from different social distances, different social status, and various problems of speakers. Furthermore, it is interesting to discuss more refusal strategies, especially its development in different social roles in the language teaching-learning process.

Refusal strategy is still fundamental, especially when we are talking about language teaching, which has appeared in pragmatic competence of refusal strategies. Misunderstanding to the interlocutors and even some severe communication of language users who are insensitive, impolite, or inept people may occur when we fail to transfer some information. Bulm Kulka (1993) argued that pragmatic competence requires a variety of abilities in using and interpreting a language in context. The most crucial competence for second and foreign language is pragmatic competence. The failure of pragmatics has a severe focus than grammatical errors as native speakers. Thomas (1983) claimed that pragmatic failure has more serious consequences than make grammatical mistakes as native speakers tend to delight pragmatic errors as offensive. Moreover, to interact with the target language, language learners have to gain an appropriate pragmatic competence.

As determined by several examples above, for non-native learners refusals or rejections became a major challenge. They need to not only mastery of the target language they learned but its culture as well. Considering these reasons, several researchers have concerned to investigate refusal strategies from a broad range of languages and cultures. Umale (2011) argued that in several interactions the most often nonnative speakers have less pragmatic competence while refusing someone kindly and properly. It can be summed up that pragmalinguistic failure occurred when nonnative speakers have a very long answer to refuse one's request since they make a huge effort to reflect politeness in their refusal words. That is the reason investigating refusal strategies in classroom interaction with multicultural learners is worth to be done.

Refusal Strategies

Refusals often use to response a request, invitation, offers, and suggestion. Refusals existed in all languages as the other speech acts. Yet, each language or culture does not have the same way in rejecting requests or suggestions. When a language learner says 'no' directly or not to any requests for any reasons, here refusals were existed. One reason of his refusal may be caused by the difference between the request and ones expectation. Refusal is one of speech acts which considered as a negative response about rejecting what speakers say such as in request, invitations, offers, and suggestions (Gass, 1999). In line with this, some researchers Felix (2006) mentioned that refusals may not always fall into this category as they are not always rejection and sometimes involve negotiation in which the participants do not even know what the final outcome will be. In some cases refusals become problematic to perform linguistically or psychologically since we might avoid hurting others' feeling. Nonetheless, as language learners with multicultural background need to be very careful to use any refusal strategies in the classroom interactions.

Indonesian Culture

Barnes (2006) and Kadarisman (2009) have the similar ideas about Indonesian Culture. They argued that Indonesian culture is very rich and collectivistic. While social harmony is the superiority among Indonesians. Still, Indonesian culture has a special norm in politeness that is the principle of mutual consideration (*tenggang rasa, tepo sliro*). Indonesians prefer to use indirect strategies to show their rejections rather than direct one since the norm or attitude of Indonesian culture builds a high degree of intimacy to the addressees. In Indonesia, it is not easy to say 'no' while rejecting for they try to keep someone's positive face. People in Indonesia embarrass easily, and it is considered very rude to deliberately make someone losing his face. Saying 'no' is potentially hurt the hearers' feelings even though they can forgive any problems easily. This cultural principle is well known as equanimity.

Chinese Culture

There is no great cultural difference between China, Indonesia, and Libya. China has a similar culture with Indonesia but it is quite different from western cultures. According to the researches of Hofstede (1984) and Scollon (2000), China is considered to be a country with a collectivistic culture as Indonesia. It emphasizes the needs and goals of the group as a whole over the needs and desires of each individual. Wang and Chen (2010) found that the representation of Chinese and East Asian people could be found from the communication styles of one culture which is categorized as collectivistic cultures.

Because China is known as collectivistic culture, that is a key characteristic of large power distance societies. For instance, someone who has a power in a certain

workplace is more dominant rather than a subordinate one. At home, parents try to teach the children to obey the parent in order to the children never refuse what parent says and the parent gains the respect of the children. Thus, collectivistic culture connotes that everyone has the authority and the inequality between higher-ups and lower-downs exist.

Libyan Culture

As one of African country Libya do not have the same culture as China and Indonesia. Libyan culture is closely similar to other Arabic community which is considered as a 'warmth' country. Means Libyan tends to indicate their politeness by considering hospitality. The values of their cultures embodied in the way they communicate with others. It is become the main reason why Libyan is generous. Belshek (2010) found that several hospitality contexts showed by Libyan as an invitation to have a meal in a restaurant highly appreciate generosity as their social identities. However, politeness is rooted to the Libyan tradition which is shaped by Islamic lessons. They believe that leading others to lose their faces is forbidden and rude. Only few empirical researches on refusal strategies which involving Arabic learner even Libyan EFL learners. Al-Eryani (2007) indicated that Yemeni learners of English tended to perform less direct in refusing to the situation given. They offer preceding reasons or explanations rather than saying 'no' directly in their refusals. Saudi EFL learners used indirect refusal strategies contained adjuncts in their refusal statements, and refusal functioning acceptance (Al-Ateeq, 2016).

Politeness Strategy

Politeness is not an innatesskill that human beings achieved when they are born. It is acquired through the process of social interaction. Simply politeness has been constructed socioculturally not naturally. Politeness used for the purpose of being 'polite'. People tend to behave politely in order to keep the hearer's face for being hurt. In a social interaction for example among family members, kids try to respect their parents or their elder sisters/brothers. This value they get when they grow up in a certain community or culture. Kids behave differently when they interact with their friend in their ages. Hence, politeness plays a significant role while explaining about refusals, as explained by Holmes (2001) that politeness involve taking account of one's feeling. Means, the main concern of the speaker in interlocutor's feeling. In line with Holmes, Brown and Levinson (1987) added that politeness involves us as the Speaker and the Hearer to show great awareness of other people's face want. The way we refuse our lecturer must be different with the way we refuse our close friends.

The present research is aimed to investigate the refusal strategies performed by Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs), Chinese EFL Learners (CLs), and Libyan EFL Learners (LLs). Hence, the problems constructed in this research were formulated into the following questions; what is refusal strategies performed? How do they respond the interlocutor? And why do they perform various refusal strategies? The third question refers to the reason behind the use of refusal strategies with different social roles.

METHOD

This research is categorized as a case study that conducted based on descriptive qualitative method. Qualitative method was used for interpreting the data and presenting descriptively. As Ary, et.al. (2010) defined that qualitative research aimed to understand phenomenon by focusing on the total picture rather than breaking it down into variables. The participants were 6 Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs), 3 Chinese EFL Learners (CLs), and 3 Libyan EFL Learners (LLs). All participants were asked to fill written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which is included a set of scenarios. Each scenario described certain situation that was followed by a blank space. More importantly, this study explored in-depth why such uses of different refusal strategies in different social roles in three different cultures background EFL learners using interviews. By applying a qualitative method, all the observed data was described and interpreted because they were meaningful in each of the contexts of the classroom. Discourse Completion Task (DCT) used to collect the data then being analyzed based on the categorization employed by Bebee et.al (1990) and to classify interlocutor's response used the theory of Gass (1999). Semi-structured interview used in this research to get deep information about the reasons for performing certain strategies in different social roles as well.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Types of refusal strategies

The results of Discourse Completion Task (DCT) revealed that *statement of regret* were repeatedly used by all learners Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs), Chinese EFL Learners (CLs), and Libyan EFL Learners (LLs) in refusing a request. Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs) and Chinese EFL Learners (CLs) followed their *statement of regrets* by expression of excuse, reasons or explanation while Libyan EFL Learners (LLs) used *statement of regret* followed by expression of options (i.e. "I am sorry Ma'am, I have a lot of things to do and what about next week, I will have time to help you"). The results also viewed that those statement of regrets used by all EFL learners due to the high level of the hearer. Negative willingness used by Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs) in the situation where they make an interaction with

their peers i.e. 'I'm sorry, I cannot help you', 'sorry, I cannot be present on your party', 'Sorry' while for high level they followed *statement of regrets* with avoidance of hedging as saying 'I'm sorry ma'am, I'm not really sure about your previous statements'.

Chinese EFL Learners (CLs) have a slight distinction of using the refusal strategies. In the situation where they communicate with those who have same level, direct strategies were applied by saying 'No' or 'No, I'm not willing to come tonight' while *Expression of negative willingness or ability, self defense, and avoidance* used when they communicate with the hearer who has high level or older than they are. 'Sorry, it's not because I do not wanna but I really have other things to do' was categorized as self-defense since it is followed with defense statements after the words 'sorry'. Expression of *Avoidance of hedge* was used as well such the words 'sorry, I'm not really sure if I can join that plans'. However, Chinese EFL Learners (CLs) prefer using *expression of regrets* with 'no' for same level, *expression of regret* and *self defense* for high level, and *expression of regret* with *expression of negative ability or willingness* for low levels.

The results described that Libyan EFL Learners (LLs) used direct strategies that is followed by *expression of negative ability or willingness* when they made an interaction to those who have same level with them by answering 'Sorry, I cannot help you now'. They preferred to say that they cannot do what the hearer wants. The use of indirect refusal strategies derived when they made an interaction and gave answer to both high and low level (i.e. 'Sorry Ma'am I do have other discussion, what about next meeting?' and 'Sorry my brother, I need to leave but I'll be here soon after my business'. Thus, Libyan EFL Learners (LLs) preferred to use *future acceptance* when answering those who have same level, *expression of regrets* and *future acceptance* when answering those who have high and low level.

Table 1. Refusal strategies in different refusal situations

Refusal Strategies		ILs			CLs			LLs		
		Peers	Low	High	Peers	Low	High	Peers	Low	High
Direct	Saying 'No'	1	0	1	3	1	1	1	1	0
	Negative Willingness	5	2	3	2	3	5	8	1	2
Indirect	Statement of regret	10	8	11	9	8	13	1	5	11
	Positive Opinion	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	0	0
	Excuse, reason, explanation	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1
	Alternative	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	3	1
	Future Acceptance	0	1	1	1	1	1	4	4	9
	Negative consecue	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Criticism	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
	Lettinginterlocutor	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0

	off the hook									
	Self defense	1	1	1	0	4	1	0	1	1
	Lack of enthusiasm	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Avoidance: Hedging, Postponement, Pause fillers	0	3	1	1	3	0	0	3	0
Adjust	Positive Opinion	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Statement of empathy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Pause Filler	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Gratitude	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0

Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs), Chinese EFL Learners (CLs), and Libyan EFL Learners (LLs) Responses to the Interlocutor

The next objective of this research as explained previous was to explain the response they perform while responding the interlocutor based on Discourse Completion Task (DCT) given during classroom activities. Even though the first results of this research have already explained briefly on each type of refusal strategies they performed still this result gave us crystal clear views on their responses due to six different refusal situations.

Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs). Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs) employed *self defense* when their lecturer gave them an instruction to submit the task in the end of the class (i.e., 'Oh ! No Ma'am. Is it enough time we have? What about early next meeting?'). Even though the final outcome of their negotiation was acceptances but they preceded their refusals to the interlocutor (lecturer) by statement of *alternative* i.e. 'how if we submit it next meeting Mam'. The interlocutor's response was direct refusals by stating 'No'. The majority of this class consisted of more Indonesian EFL Learners than others led them briefly performing direct refusal strategies in their negotiations. The result also viewed that they say 'No' which is followed by *statement of explanation* to response the direct refusal strategy used by the interlocutor. The less use of *compromise* and *refusal* as their final outcomes became the minor result of this study. The fact revealed that they used five initial responses namely *refuse*, *sincere acceptance*, *non-acceptance*, and *alternative postpone*.

Chinese EFL Learners (CLs). The result described that Chinese EFL Learners (CLs) preferred to state their positive opinions (feelings) rather than directly refuse the interlocutor request even though the final outcomes was agreement (acceptances). They said 'I do apology Ma'am, when I have finished my works I will get to your class'. In the fact, they used indirect strategies that are followed by *the*

expression of regret and also negative willingness. Refusal was the initial response to the interlocutor. They preceded their indirect strategies by giving *statement of explanation*. Since they were only three Chinese EFL Learners in this class, they did not have many responses as Indonesian EFL Learners have. When they feel unsatisfied or disagree on the interlocutor statements they performed refusal strategies. The final outcome of this response was acceptance and compromise. During the observation it was found Chinese EFL Learners (CLs) preferred stating positive opinion (feelings) and used *expression of regret*, *excuse*, *sarcasm*, and also *negative willingness* more than Indonesian EFL Learners did.

Libyan EFL Learners (LLs). The results revealed that Libyan EFL Learners (LLs) used expression of regret, negative willingness and the final outcome was future acceptances. They used of future acceptance preceded by an alternative statement. In a certain situation, when the interlocutor asked them to have a presentation on their works they did not make any refusal. They use expression of regret "I am sorry ma'am" and 'sorry ma'am' to begin their refusal strategies. Beginning the refusal by saying 'sorry' followed by long explanation has become their refusal styles. Regarding the use of this style, Eryani's (2007) study of Yemeni EFL Learners indicated that most of Yemeni EFL Learners start their refusal by stating an excuse expression 'sorry'. Thus, Libyan EFL Learners (LLs) attempted to express their politeness to the interlocutor with an option statement, regret with indirect refusals.

Reasons of Using Different Strategies in Different Refusal Situations

Semi-structured interview. Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs) used both strategies in expressing their refusals *direct and indirect* strategies. The use of different strategies in their refusals cause of Indonesian has what they named *tata karma*. They used slang words in their refusals when the interlocutor was their friends while polite words to the elder interlocutor (different ways for different ages). They used such polite ways to keep interlocutor's face or heart or feeling. Direct strategies used to low status (i.e., friends' younger brother or sister) for keeping the wants of the hearer to be a part of speaker's family while bald-on record for there was no wants to mitigate refusals. This result was in line with Rahayu (2019) which found that Indonesian English Learners (IELs) can easily said 'no' directly when their position is higher than the requester. They also used positive politeness when they refuse their friends to keep the closeness while using negative politeness for they have different social status (distance).

Chinese EFL Learners (CLs) were similar with Indonesian EFL Learners(ILs) using both strategies *direct and indirect* strategies in expressing their refusals. The use of smiling also was found due to the lack of English vocabularies. The reason of using both strategies stand on the situation that build the interaction, the environment, age of the hearer. They used different ways of refusal strategies to keep

interlocutor's face or heart and also to respect them. They also used *expression of regret* in the situation where they have to refuse their friends by saying 'sorry'. It was in line with the finding of Chang (2009). He found that Chinese participants had the highest regret responses where they have to refuse her friends' requests. All Chinese EFL Learners (CLs) used bald-on record for lower status, positive politeness for same status, and negative politeness for high status.

The result showed that unlike Asian or Western country, a little refusal strategies used by Libyan EFL Learners (LLs). Their answers indicated that they have never use refusals in their communities. They sometimes say 'yes' for refusing what the interlocutor's request or offer. When they have to refuse the hearer they often use expression of regret and an alternatives statement. The results concerning this strategy were in line with the previous study including Masaoud (2019) study on apology. He indicated that all Libyan informants used the expression of remorse or regret in several situations (i.e., same status/friends, high status/elderly, and people who have power/ boss). Even though the study was on apologies strategy but it is still significantly worth to be discussed relating to this present research result. The aims of using different refusal strategies was the want to keep interlocutor positive face and not to ruin the relationship. It was culturally constructed that all Libyan are family. They always have time to help others even though in their hectic days. That's why they used expression of regret and an alternative (i.e., sorry, what about next day). However, all Libyan EFL Learners (LLs) used negative politeness in their refusals for both high and low status and positive politeness for similar status.

Conclusion

This present research has the contribution to our pragmalinguistic knowledge on the use of refusal strategies in different situations and different social status among Indonesian EL Learners (ILs), Chinese EFL Learners, and Libyan EFL Learners. Based on the results and discussion, Indonesian EFL Learners (ILs) used expression of negative willingness and expression of regret for equal status and low status while expression of regret and expression of avoidance for high status. In according to this result, Chinese EFL Learners (CLs) performed expression of regret and expression of negative willingness for high status, expression of regret and self-defense for high status, and expression of regret and directly saying 'no' for equal status. Moreover, Libyan EFL Learners (LLs) performed expression of regret and expression of future acceptance for high and low status while future acceptances for equal status.

The responses used by Indonesian EFL Learners to the interlocutor based on the result were directly saying 'no', stating an explanation, expressing self-defense, and also expression of negative willingness while the final outcome was expression of refusal and compromise statement. They used acceptance, non acceptance, alternative and postpone as their initial responses to the interlocutor. Chinese EFL Learners (CLs) performed expression of regret, stating an excuse, expression of

sarcasm, expression of positive opinion or agreement, and also expression of negative willingness. The final outcomes of their refusal strategies were acceptances and compromise. Chinese EFL Learners (CLs) showed an alternative, non acceptance, and acceptance sincerely as their initial response. Libyan EFL Learners (LLs) responded the interlocutor by using expression of regret and also future acceptance while their initial response was only the use of sincere acceptance. The results showed that all EFL Learners used politeness in their refusal strategies to keep interlocutor's face, heart, and feeling.

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